Elton and the American nightmare

WHEN good Americans die they go to Paris. When bad Americans die they go to . . .America, according to the legendary doctrine of one Mr Wilde. But what he didn't point out was that young English musicians often have to pay for their European success by a quick flip over the Atlantic WHILE THEY ARE STILL ALIVE!

Which isn't always their idea of the trip of a lifteime. In fact they often return so bitter that they give the impression that their minds have been hi-jacked onto another plane.

Not so Elton John. He's just back from a three-weeks, apparently highly successful visit – his first ever to the United (or otherwise) States of America.

"London is a very beautiful place", was his first comment as we met

"So is America", he added, "but the difference is simply that everything over there is exaggerated out of all proportion.

"Consequently there are bits and pieces which are like a nightmare."

Worst of his memories was a constant feeling of apprehension, a feeling that there was an accident round the next corner. It never happened: the gunshots were always on the next block. But he heard them. They WERE there.

"I think the tension almost forces kids to get right into music. Apart from the general turmoil this was my other main impression. Kids over there really know about music.

"In Philadelphia we played two gigs which were really wild. At the end I got up on top of the piano and started looning. The kids had all just let go, they are far less inhibited than people over here."

It's probably because the pressures in England are slightly less: during his visit Elton John played 50 sets; he said that three months work was telescoped into three weeks; he was impressed with the efficiency of the American music industry and flattered when people like Randy Newman, Leon Russell, Graham Nash, the Beach Boys and Quincey Jones turned up to watch him.

First impression: "It stinks. It really smells, the whole city seemed to have gone off. It was really terrible. Everybody who lives there keeps apologising for it. New Yorkers get really upset about what's happening to the city but they say it just gets worse and worse."

Of the people he met during his stay he said: "They were mostly very nice and pretty intelligent. But I can see that I obviously found them interesting because they were interested in my music."

But his overall picture of Americans is much different. He explained: "They seem to have some sort of mental block as a nation. They seem to be constantly looking for something that, most of the time, just isn't there. They look for a deep motive in a shallow pool."

He thinks, as do many people whose home is a country like England which is so hidebound in tradition, that much of the confusion America is feeling derives directly from the fact that it has no real tradition, no precedents for facing situations.

But he is optimistic that the country's young people can somehow grasp the wheel and point the country in a better direction than the one it is now facing.

Unfortunately, as Mr Wilde put it, the youth of America IS its oldest tradition.

ENGLISHNOTE: Although he returns to America soon Elton is busy in England at the moment recording the vocal tracks for 'Friends' a film for which he has written the score. His latest LP 'Tumblewood Connection' will be released later this month.

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